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## ON THE TEACHING OF FRENCH PRONUNCIATION

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If we are willing to discuss French pronunciation at its very root, without the suspicion of an assumption, we shall have to begin by asking ourselves the searching question whether it is worth teaching at all. That is a fair question: we must not let even a special interest in phonetics blind us to its sanity. Of course the "practical" conversation-enthusiasts will promptly proclaim that a good pronunciation is the first and fundamental thing: there can be no possible doubt about it, since the object of language-study is to learn to speak, and a satisfactory pronunciation is a large part of correct speech. If, however, our conversational friends have no objections, we should like to ask them to think for a moment of the situation of the classics in England. If one may safely assert that the contribution of classical culture to the intellectual life of England has been significant—if Plato and Horace have meant something to English thought, in spite of a pronunciation more redolent of Oxford than of Athens or Tusculum—may we not have to reconsider our proclamation that the sounds of the language are the whole thing? Perhaps we shall remember, too, that there are those who enjoy much of the fine flavor of Montaigne and Pascal and Voltaire and Sainte-Beuve without possessing any appreciable ability to pronounce correctly. When we have thought on these things it may be that we shall hit upon something which the old-fashioned call ideas. It may even be that we shall consent to lose the whole world of sound, if we can win this, the soul of literature.

But the loss is none the less deplorable. Our friends who pronounce badly or not at all are missing a great deal. And so, having made generous concessions to the inarticulate study of language, we are now in a position to return an honest affirmative to the modest query whether the study of pronunciation has any place

at all in language work. There are at least six reasons for giving such an answer: (1) It is impossible to prevent the student from forming some sound-image for the printed word which he sees, and the sheer interest of truth should compel us to make that image as accurate as possible. (2) The study of pronunciation trains the ear to careful discrimination and the speech organs to intelligent action. (3) Sounds are natural phenomena, and therefore correct interpretation of them is a part of science. (4) In like manner the development of a feeling for beautiful sounds is a lesson in esthetics. (5) Correct pronunciation is essential to the highest appreciation of such literary forms as poetry, drama, and oration—all literature, in fact, in every aspect but the purely intellectual one. (6) A good pronunciation is necessary for those who wish to speak a language pleasingly—not the highest form of language-study, but an important form. Hence, though not essential, pronunciation may be looked upon as highly important. When we say that it is not essential, we mean for our students, of course. For teachers every side of the language is essential; in the matter of pronunciation they should be satisfied with nothing short of perfection.

Assuming, then, that our subject is important, if not all-important, we shall next consider some ways of teaching it effectively. The suggestions to be made herein may be outlined as follows: (1) Select a scientific method. (2) Give the pronunciation inductively (by imitation), before the study of principles is taken up—concrete facts before rules. (3) Present all possible sounds—in particular the vowels—in contrasted series, before giving minute attention to each alone. (4) If possible supplement the preliminary inductive work by some concentrated study of separate sounds and of the principles behind them.

We come first to the question of method. While it is well for those of us who have learned to respect the science of phonetics to be on our guard against hobby-riding, yet we may be pardoned if we feel convinced that the modern scientific way of treating the French sounds is in every respect superior to the old-fashioned combination of guesswork and error. The new method involves nothing more terrifying than an accurate analysis of the facts, and there is no reason why we should be technical in our attempt to be

scholarly. The student of pronunciation needs, in the first place, to get a correct idea of what the most important sounds are like, and the science of phonetics has taught us that it is *not* correct, for instance, to make the French *e* in *des* even approximately equivalent to the English vowel in *day*; hence there is no good reason why one should decry a simple explanation of the undesirable "glide-sound" in the English word just because it happens to be scientific and exact—and "phonetics"! Secondly, a student can be helped to form the French sounds by some simple suggestions regarding the use of the organs of speech; and we must turn to the phonetician for classification and explanation of sounds according to this principle. Thirdly, he must know how properly to associate the unsystematic and irrational spellings of the standard orthography with the sounds for which they are supposed to stand. Now the old pre-phonetic grammars did none of these things satisfactorily; but happily there exist today grammars with accurate chapters on pronunciation and also a few manuals which have passed muster with the critics. Not that everything modern is good; in fact, some recent works are ludicrous. But accurate books can be found.<sup>1</sup>

We shall assume then a practical but modern and scientific method. But it is not enough to have a good treatment of pronunciation; one must know how to use it. Here the writer will make bold to recount his own experience, believing (tentatively) that it reveals an important principle. For several years he had taught the subject conscientiously from a manual—and with satisfactory results. The method used may be characterized as *intensive*, in that it demanded concentrated study and practice of a single sound until mastered, and then the next sound. It might also be called *theoretical*, since, though great importance was attached to learning by imitation, the student was also expected to utilize the exposition of the principles. Partly from a study of what progressive Germans are doing, and partly from observation in the classroom, it finally dawned upon the teacher that his method—in spite of excellent results—was still defective. In the first

<sup>1</sup> For a list of works on this subject we refer the reader to Professor James Geddes' *French Pronunciation* (Oxford University Press, 1913), with the warning that the author is rather too merciful to some pretty poor books.

place it became apparent that the intensive concentration upon one sound resulted in a blurring of those distinctions which stand out so sharply when phenomena are intelligently contrasted; that some students would almost forget what sound they were trying to make, so hard were they straining to make it. Secondly, this method seemed defective because it did not reserve all systematic exposition of theory until the facts had been met inductively, when theory would be welcomed as an aid to classification and clarification. Hence it seemed probable that there was a more excellent way of approach than the intensive, *the way of contrast*; that the sounds might better be presented in series, emphasizing the place of each in the broad perspective and its differences from its neighbors. And it became clear at the same time that inductive imitation should precede all theory.

The best illustration will be a detailed explanation.<sup>1</sup> Phoneticians know that the eight fundamental French vowels—*fié, fée, fête, fade, fable, folle, faux, fou*—form a logical series or scale. In the first vowel the mouth is a narrow slit and the tongue is forward; in the last the mouth is rounded and the tongue is back.<sup>2</sup> We begin our presentation of pronunciation by giving to the class the first and the last sounds in this scale, which, being farthest apart, are mostly sharply contrasted: *i, ou; i, ou; fine, fou; mie, mou;* etc. Then we insert the half-way sound of *a*: *fine, fade, fou; mie, ma, mou; dit, date, doux*. When this much has been mastered, we insert the sounds of *é* and *è* between *i* and *a*: *fine, fée, fête, fade; dit, dé, dès, date; gît, j'ai, jet, jatte* (with the explanation that these vowels form a rational series, in which the mouth progresses from a narrow slit to a round opening). Next we insert the *o* sounds between "broad" *a* and *ou*: *fable, folle, faux, fou; mâle, molle, môle, moule*.

The three sounds heard in *peur, peu, pu* also form a series. We may allow ourselves to consider the vowel in *peur* as a rough

<sup>1</sup> Most of what follows here is extremely elementary. It is an old story to those who have studied phonetics, but it must be told here for the sake of clearness and for the benefit of those to whom it may be new.

<sup>2</sup> These physiological facts need not be imposed upon young students, but they are the basis of this presentation of the subject.

equivalent to the English vowel in *sir*, and then proceed to form the vowels in *peu* and *pu* by rounding the lips and pushing the tongue forward and upward as we proceed. This process is sometimes helpful in learning the difficult French *u*.

Another arrangement of these eleven sounds is the well-known triangle, given below in the alphabet of the International Association, by the side of a more popular phonetic alphabet which has proved useful. In both the sound of *e* in *le* is taken as the equivalent of *eu* in *peur*.

<i>i</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>ou</i>
<i>e</i>	ø	<i>o</i>	é	eú	ô
ε	æ	ə	è	eu	o
<i>a</i>			<i>a</i>		
<i>a</i>			â		

At the lowest point of this triangle the tongue is in its lowest position, but as we ascend on the right or the left the tongue gradually rises to the highest possible position for French vowels. As we proceed to the left the front of the tongue is raised; as we proceed toward the right its back is raised. The angle of the jaws is greatest at the bottom of the triangle, and is gradually diminished as we ascend.<sup>1</sup> If we combine the tongue-position of the vowels in the left-hand column with the lip position of those in the right-hand one, the result is the vowel in the middle column.<sup>2</sup> Thus we find it possible to present such series as *mais, mort, meurt; fée, faux, feu; pie, poux, pu*; and so on.

By this presentation the vowels are given in contrast, not as isolated entities: thus we emphasize those characteristics which distinguish them from each other and also their relationships to each other. The wider and more obvious contrasts are presented first, then the finer distinctions. They are always pronounced in their series, never alone. Every lesson, day after day, month after month, may begin with a rehearsal of this triangle, backward,

<sup>1</sup> See Walter Rippmann, *Elements of Phonetics* (Dent, 1905), pp. 25 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Some scientists emphasize the contention that *u* corresponds, not to the tongue position of *i*, but to a very close *é*; and *eú*, not to *é*, but to *è*. The difference is not of immediate practical value to American students.

forward, and crosswise; first the vowels as they stand, and then prefixing or affixing the difficult consonants (*r*, *l*, *t*). Only by means of repetition shall we achieve any real familiarity with the strange French sounds. It may be well to add the four nasals to this exercise, and to have a clear chart containing these fifteen vowel sounds hanging in the classroom for daily use. The moment a student becomes confused in trying to pronounce one of the vowels, he should return to the series in which it is found and seek to recover his perspective.

It is the explicit purpose of this paper to deal with principles; but two details are of such importance that a word may be said about them by the way:

1. The sound of *é*. Usually our students pronounce this like *è*, or even let it degenerate into "eh-ee." It is in fact an exceedingly difficult sound. By all odds the most satisfactory approach to it seems to be through the English "short *i*." Let students be instructed to pronounce *dé* with the English vowel in *did*. If they stop there it will be better than "deh-ee"; but usually they can be induced to open the sound just a little toward "day," and the average result is pretty satisfactory.<sup>1</sup>

2. In similar fashion it is well to stress the "ee" element in the difficult *u*. Usually such a word as *bu* becomes "boo" or "byoo" in the mouth of the American student; that is, he exaggerates the importance of the "oo" element. Let him therefore disregard it altogether at first and pronounce every French *u* like "ee" in English. When this pronunciation is merging into a habit, a slight rounding of the lips (as for "oo") will bring about the desired fusion of the two elements. When this sound appears as a semi-vowel (e.g., in *juin*, *puis*, *Bossuet*) it is even more difficult to catch. It is best to pronounce such words at first as though the *u* were wholly syllabic (thus "ju-in," "pu-is," "Bos-su-et"), and then pass to the lighter pronunciation with the semi-vowel value.

After these fifteen vowel sounds have been mastered, the consonants may be taken up. For the purposes of review and variety each successive consonant may well be combined with all the vowel

<sup>1</sup> The *y* in *very* is pretty close to this French *é*.

sounds in their rational order; thus (for *d*) *dît, dê, dès, date, damne, donne, dos, doux, laideur, deux, du, dans, daim, dont, d'un*.<sup>1</sup>

After this first view in perspective we may, if we like, turn again to the beginning of the subject and do some intensive work on each sound, for the purpose of smoothing off all the rough places. Our method is still inductive—imitation of the teacher with no study of rules. Very possibly this inductive method of teaching sounds, solely by imitation, may be quite enough for beginners, perhaps not; everything depends on the extent to which we mean to study pronunciation. At any rate, if one wishes to continue beyond this purely imitative stage, the following suggestions may be permitted:

1. It is recommended that the intensive study of pronunciation (if undertaken at all) be concentrated into a few weeks, and that no other language work accompany it. This sounds like an arbitrary demand: it is due to the simple human fact that pronunciation is never seriously *studied* when it is tacked on to lessons in reading and composition.

2. It is wise to increase the number of class meetings and to diminish the hours of preparation during the period of intensive study of pronunciation. For instance, if a class normally meets three hours per week and studies three, we may increase the meetings to four or five hours and decrease the hours of study to two or even only one. The reason for this change is that in pronunciation the private work of the student is much less valuable than the class-work.<sup>2</sup>

3. Enforce private practice of the exercises, always assuming that the student has first heard them carefully pronounced by the teacher.

4. Expect some study of theory, except by young children. Theory is here taken to mean such simple things as the ability to

<sup>1</sup> The present writer has naturally tried to incorporate into his own manuals (*Exercises on French Sounds* and the more advanced *Introduction to the Pronunciation of French*, published by Jenkins, New York) exercises of this kind and other features which have appealed to him as desirable.

<sup>2</sup> While the value of the phonograph for purposes of learning to pronounce may not be quite so extraordinary as some enthusiasts seem to believe, it should not be overlooked. It is especially helpful in the hours of private practice, and as a support to teachers who may be a little weak in pronunciation.



describe the peculiarities of the foreign sounds—for instance to distinguish the French *des* from the English *day* (=“deh<sup>ee</sup>”); also to explain the relation of spelling to pronunciation, e.g., “s between vowels has the sound of z, elsewhere it is like s.”

5. Finally, I advocate a moderate use of phonetic transcription—not necessarily the strange signs of the International Association, but some simple alphabet designed to give consistent visual notation to sound. To those who indignantly condemn such a practice, we may simply put this question: “What essential difference is there between the use of phonetic transcriptions and the use of a pronouncing dictionary for difficult words in our own tongue?” When you want to know whether *architrave* is pronounced “arki” or “artchi,” you simply consult your pronouncing dictionary and the *k* tells you at a glance. Now almost every French spelling is as enigmatical to the young American as *architrave* may be to the adult. Phonetic transcriptions accustom the student to express in writing his conception of the pronunciation of a given word, and, when this written form is corrected and learned, it becomes a permanent picture which will ever after help to prevent mistakes.<sup>1</sup> A glance at a few typical words will show why this is so. Look at *veille*, *vieille*, *veuille*, and *vaille*: these almost always worry the class. Let us now transcribe them as “vèy,” “vyèy,” “veuy,” and “vay”; can anybody misread those? *Reine* and *rien* are less likely to be confused than “rèn” and “ryě.” Such transcriptions of sentences as “âksèbô” or “sam frè dla pèn” convey notions of phrasing and quality that few derive from the conventional *Ah! que c'est beau*, or *Ça me ferait de la peine*. This matter of transcribing into phonetic symbols should be tactfully introduced, so that there may be no danger of arousing prejudice. The first work of this sort may well be done by the teacher himself before the class. By such spellings as “vèy” and “vyèy” or “jă” (*gens*) and “jèn” (*gêne*) he can show his students that words can be represented in

<sup>1</sup> There is no denying the shortcomings of the present alphabetic scheme. As Paul Passy (*Les sons du français*, 1899, p. 19) puts it: “Different letters are used to represent the same sound, as *c* and *q* in *coq*; the same letter is used for different sounds, as *c* in *car* and *cent*; two letters are used for one sound, as *ch* in *champ*; a single letter represents two sounds, as *x* for *gz* in *exemple*, or for *ks* in *boxe*; frequently a letter is altogether silent, as *e* in *beau* or *z* in *nez*.”

a logical and helpful fashion far superior to the usual spellings. After a reasonable amount of this kind of demonstration has broken the ice, short easy assignments should be given to the class. As this work increases in amount and difficulty, its value will grow more and more evident. Many a student who begins it with a groan will later instinctively clear up difficulties of pronunciation by seeking the correct phonetic transcriptions.

By phonetic transcriptions one means the omission of all silent letters and the representation of the sounds by a clear and consistent notation; thus *doigt*="dwa," *quand*="kă." Personally I believe that the phonetic alphabet should, for practical reasons, be as nearly as possible like the orthodox French alphabet, and therefore I feel that the admirable international phonetic alphabet is not the happiest possible selection for young students. If our sole object be to facilitate the learning of French pronunciation, is it not then a little confusing to be told that phonetic *tu* is pronounced *tou*, that *j*=*y*, and *y*=*u*, etc.? Is it not simpler to write *tout* as *tou*; to give *j* an obvious value (e.g., as in *rouge*="rouj"); and to let *y* represent, in a word like *hier* ("=yèr"), a value that will never jar with any written French we see? Excellent results have no doubt been obtained with the international alphabet, and many are attached to it for various reasons, sentimental or rational. Every teacher should of course know it and advanced classes may well use it. But experience and reflection argue for its simplification when we are dealing with any but specialists. If our purpose were to further a general phonetic propaganda or to train phoneticians we might do differently, but I do not feel that we should make the best choice in adopting this un-French alphabet when we simply aim to help students to learn to pronounce French: its very excellence as an international alphabet keeps it from being the best stepping-stone to French alone.

This view has been opposed by a teacher of German who takes the ground that the international alphabet should be taught in connection with French because it will be ready for use by those who later take up German. But how about such a plan from the point of view of the French class? If our special alphabet proves to be far better adapted to our special French purpose, it may be that

French teachers will have to decline to consider any other claims. For this decision they would have several reasons: (1) They must consider primarily the immediate needs of their own class, many of whose members may never take up German. (2) The need of a phonetic alphabet is much more acute in French because of its confused orthography; even if such an alphabet is used in the later German courses, it is by no means so great a necessity. (3) The important thing is to create a phonetic sense; given this, it will not be difficult for pupils to adapt themselves to varying phonetic alphabets in different languages.

When the manual<sup>1</sup> is finished we may well follow up the study of the subject by assigning a particular portion of some reading lesson for pronunciation work; some of this may be transcribed phonetically. Conversation work, too, fits in nicely with pronunciation. If we take the trouble to familiarize the class with material to be used in conversation by giving it first as dictation, then by having it pronounced and at least partially written out phonetically, it will become so familiar and will be so well pronounced that conversation will be both pleasant and profitable.

Let us not forget that a foreign pronunciation is a difficult discipline, usually demanding in the adult some intelligence and much practice. Society ladies and indolent students will lament when compelled to follow any rigorous method: they are quite satisfied with the easy and the ineffective. Let us not deceive ourselves nor them. Good results will come from hard work alone. But this hard work can be simplified by the scientific method, the inductive approach, and the principle of contrast by perspective.

<sup>1</sup> That is to say, the intensive study of pronunciation, by whatever means it be pursued.